



Extended Research Article

The implementation of Safety Management Systems in healthcare: a systematic review and international comparison

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Published March 2025
DOI: 10.3310/QPLF8546

Plain language summary

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Health and Social Care Delivery Research 2025; Vol. 13: No. 7
DOI: 10.3310/QPLF8546

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What is this review about?

In health care, errors can cause serious harm to patients or others. Other high-risk industries, such as aviation, have improved safety by using an approach called a safety management system. These systems focus on four key areas:

1. Having a plan for safety and someone to lead it.
2. Having a system to identify and reduce risks.
3. Having a system to monitor and improve how safe the organisation is.
4. Training and encouraging staff to make the organisation safer.

To work well, safety management systems need to be specific to the industry where they are being used, so this review asked:

How are safety management systems being used in health care?

What studies are included?

We included evidence from Australia, Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands and New Zealand because their healthcare systems are similar to the United Kingdom's. We included policy documents, research papers and accounts of patient and staff experiences.

What are the main findings?

Only the Netherlands had a patient safety programme that used a safety management system approach. The programme improved some areas of patient safety, but this varied between and within hospitals.

Some of the four areas of a safety management system were found in the patient safety policies of the other four countries.

What do the findings mean?

While only the Netherlands used a safety management system approach, the four main areas could be identified in the approaches of the other countries. In all included countries, patient safety policy and practice are changing as a result of new ideas about how to improve safety.

Stakeholder and public and patient involvement

Experts from patient safety organisations in each country and public collaborators provided feedback throughout the project.

How up to date is this review?

The review was based on documents published between 2007 and 2023.

Health and Social Care Delivery Research

ISSN 2755-0079 (Online)

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Health and Social Care Delivery Research (HSDR) was launched in 2013 and is indexed by Europe PMC, DOAJ, INAHTA, Ulrichsweb™ (ProQuest LLC, Ann Arbor, MI, USA), NCBI Bookshelf, Scopus and MEDLINE.

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Editorial contact: journals.library@nihr.ac.uk

This journal was previously published as *Health Services and Delivery Research* (Volumes 1–9); ISSN 2050-4349 (print), ISSN 2050-4357 (online)

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This article

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The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HSDR programme or one of its preceding programmes as award number NIHR136105. The contractual start date was in July 2023. The draft manuscript began editorial review in April 2024 and was accepted for publication in September 2024. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HSDR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' manuscript and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this article.

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